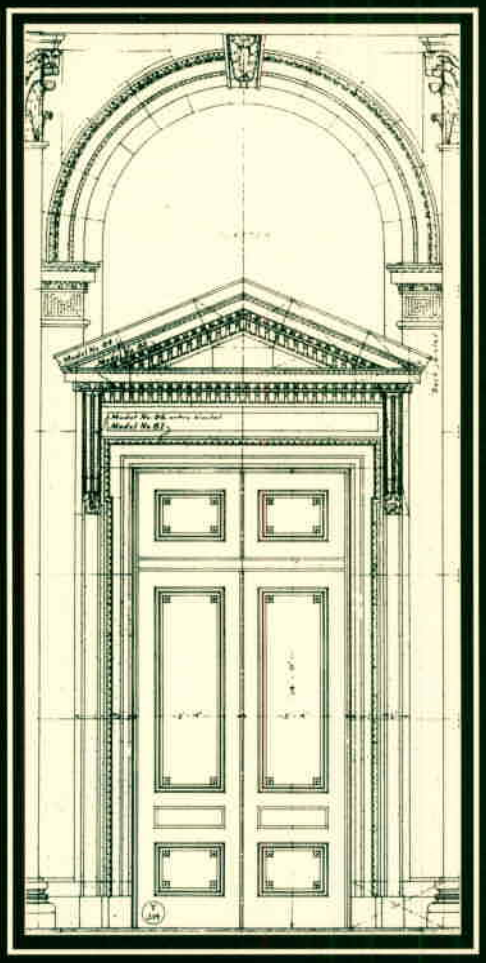
The Senate Caucus Room



UNITED STATES SENATE

The Senate Caucus Room

The Caucus Room of the Russell Senate Office Building is one of the grandest and most historic rooms in the nation's capital. As its name implies, the Caucus Room was originally intended for party caucuses or meetings where members of the same party decided upon their candidates, policies, and legislative matters. Prior to completion of the Senate Office Building, each party held its caucuses wherever it could find available space, sometimes in the Senate Reception Room and Senate Chamber.

The Caucus Room, and the office building, built between 1906 and 1909, were designed by John Carrère and Thomas Hastings, prominent New York architects.

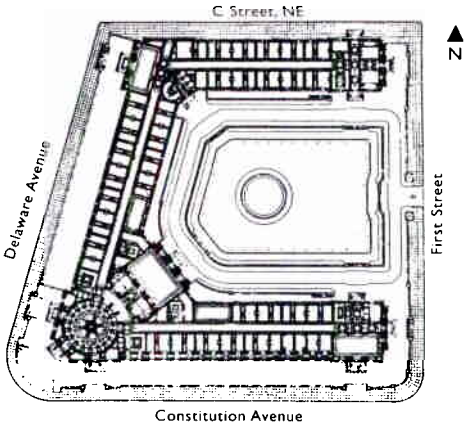
A view of the Caucus Room showing the decorative ceiling, columns, and pilasters

The main entrance of the Russell Senate Office Building, corner of Constitution and Delaware Avenues, NE

The Russell Senate Office Building

Until 1909 senators had no official office building but instead met in committee rooms of the Capitol or in their private residences. Fifty members had office space in the old Maltby building, which was located on New Jersey and Constitution Avenues. Because of the great need for expanded working space, Congress passed the Sundry Civil Appropriations Act of 1904, providing for a new fireproof Senate office complex and creating a Senate Building Commission. Although the cornerstone of the structure was laid in 1906, the building was not officially occupied until 1909.

House members had faced the same office space predicament as the Senate and likewise had decided in 1903 to construct what is now known as the Cannon House Office Building. Both the House and Senate Building Commissions awarded their respective architectural contracts to the esteemed firm of Carrère and Hastings.



(top) A plan of the Russell Building with three sides, as completed in 1909

(bottom) The Russell Building after completion of the fourth side in 1933

John Carrère (1858-1911)

Thomas Hastings (1860-1929)

John Carrère and Thomas Hastings designed both buildings as identical four-sided structures; however, the fourth side of the Senate building was not completed until 1933. They also doubled the size of each senator's office because only 90 senators, as opposed to 386 representatives, needed office space. Carrère and Hastings' plans included a Caucus Room for each building.

Carrère and Hastings

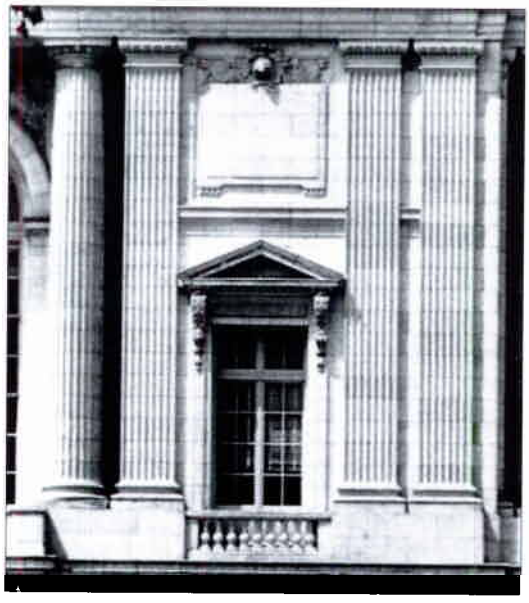
Carrère and Hastings received their professional education at the architecture school of the École des Beaux-Arts, Paris, which trained them in a traditionally academic and classical manner. The École emphasized that the aesthetics of the building should be derived from the classical tradition while the "form [of the building] follows [its] function."

The Senate and House office buildings brilliantly display their architects' French training. The beauty of these edifices rests not only with the aesthetic decoration chosen by the architects, but also with their careful and pragmatic planning. Decoratively, Carrère and Hastings turned primarily to French classical sources. The grand and classical exterior of the Senate building, the rusticated lower base, the double colonnade which supports a Doric entablature and heavy cornice, and the classical balustrade recall the eighteenth-century facade of the Louvre. Even the swags under the fourth-floor windows were typically French.

Yet Carrère and Hastings remained modernists in their plans for the office building. They efficiently equipped the structure with ample entrances, exits, elevators, stairwells, toilet facilities, and storage and office space, so that the interior conformed to the standards of an early twentieth-century building.

Thomas Hastings said:
"Were it necessary, we could trace two distinctly parallel lines, one the history of civilization and the other the history of the style in art. In each case we should find a gradual development, a quick succession of events, a revival, perhaps almost a revolution and a consequent reaction always together, like a cause and effect, showing that architecture and life must correspond. In order to build a living architecture, we must build as we live."

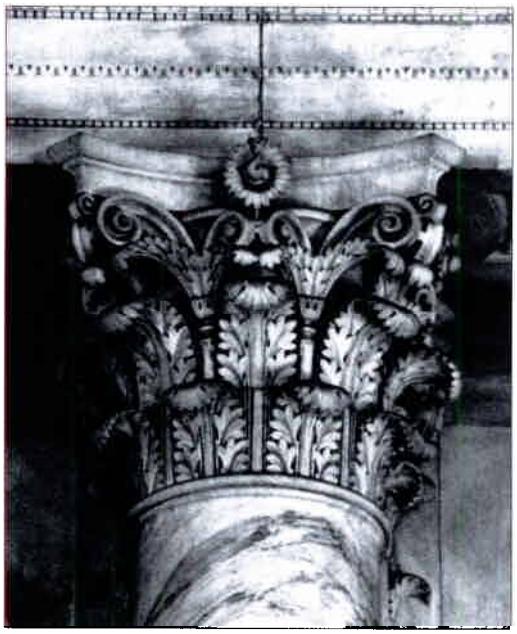
A closeup view showing the details of a Russell Building window



Caucus Room

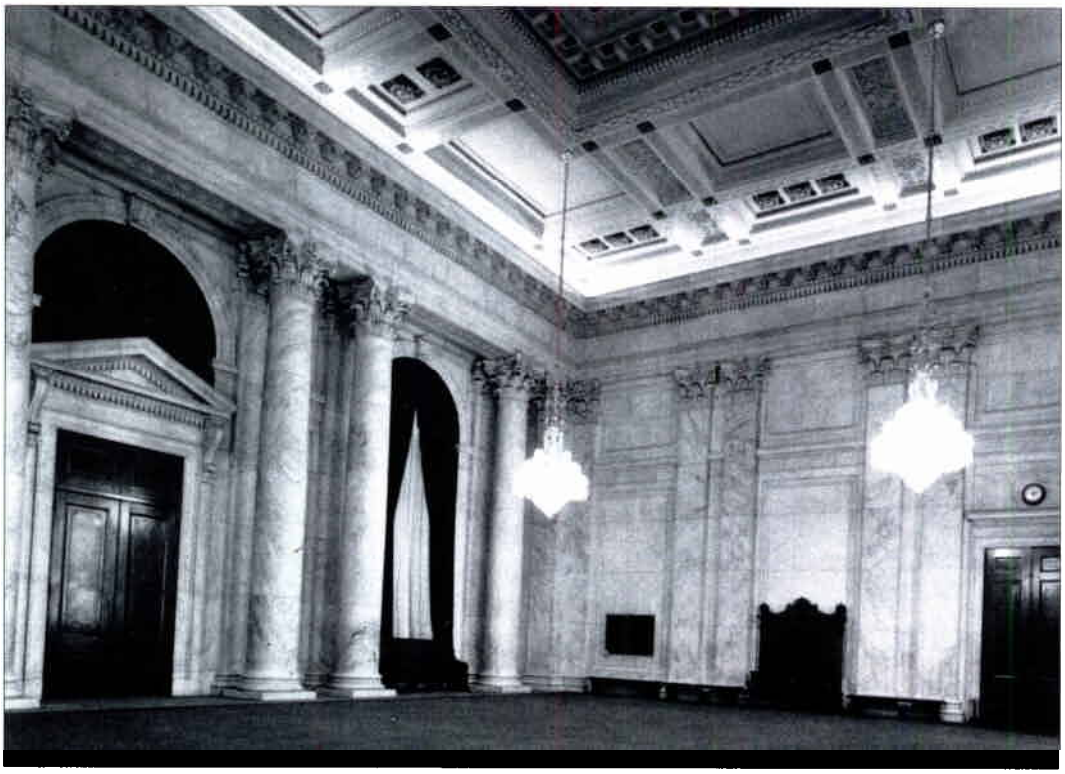
The Caucus Room further reflects Carrère and Hastings' French-derived style as well as their practical forethought. Originally, they proposed two plans for the Caucus Room: an amphitheater and a rectangular room. Architect of the Capitol Elliot Woods chose the latter, as he felt it more practical. Carrère and Hastings indeed provided the Senate with a functional room. Three grand windows illuminate the room, which is fifty-four by seventy-four by thirty-five feet high and can comfortably seat 300 people. The architects also provided sufficient exits and convenient storage rooms, one located on each lateral end.

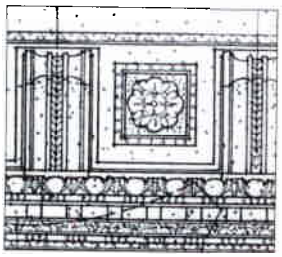
Carrère and Hastings proved their concern for academic exactitude by their carefully chosen patterns and material for the



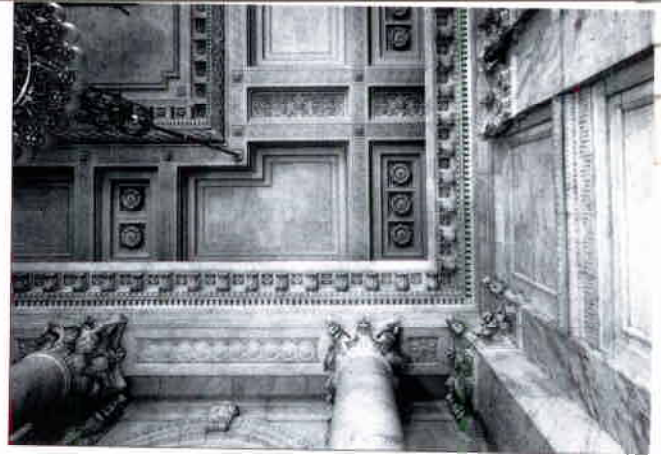
Detail of the Corinthian capital of a column

(below) A view of the Caucus Room showing the pediment over the main doorway





Architect's drawing of details



A view of decorative details found in the ceiling

Caucus Room. For their marble floor designs, they looked at French classical sources such as Fontainebleau and Hotel des Invalides. They also searched for over a year to find the Italianate black-veined marble that came from South Dover, New Jersey.

The interior decoration of the room is classically grand yet refined, much in the tradition of Versailles. Twelve Corinthian columns along the longitudinal walls flank three French windows and support an architrave and frieze. Above the frieze are classically derived motifs of dentils, egg and dart molding, and brackets. A Greek key forms a ribbon at the top of the Corinthian pilasters. A large keystone crowns each window arch, and over the main doorway is a triangular pediment as found in ancient Greek temples. Perhaps the most elegant feature of the room is its ceiling. One notes immediately the gilded rosettes, rows of acanthus leaves, and ribbon of Greek key pattern.

The distinctive furniture seen in the Caucus Room today, commissioned in 1910 from the Francis Bacon Furniture Company of Boston, includes the original six mahogany benches and two settles capped with carved eagles.

The furniture company's mark that appears on the benches and settles in the room

(left) One of the Caucus Room's carved mahogany settles

Historical Events Associated with the Caucus Room

Although originally intended for party caucuses, the size and grandeur of the room made it a likely site for major public hearings. For the past eighty years the Caucus Room has served as a stage for some of the most dramatic Senate investigations, such as the sinking of the *Titanic*, the Teapot Dome scandal, Pearl Harbor, the Kefauver Crime Committee, the Army vs. McCarthy, the Vietnam War, and Watergate.


THE EVENING STAR, TUESDAY, APRIL 23, 1912.

THE SENATE SUBCOMMITTEE IN SESSION INVESTIGATING THE TITANIC DISASTER.

A newspaper photo of the overflow crowd attending the Titanic *hearing*

The sinking of the *Titanic*, with a loss of fifteen hundred lives including many prominent Americans, led to the first investigation held in the Caucus Room. On April 22, 1912, only a week after the *Titanic* went down, a special Senate subcommittee opened public hearings and called British officials of the White Star Line to testify. Senators, representatives, diplomats, reporters, and hundreds of women, chiefly delegates to a Daughters of the American Revolution convention, crowded into the room. When police blocked further entrance, many spectators rushed to nearby rooms and climbed out onto balconies to watch the proceedings through the Caucus Room's great French windows. Disconcerted by this raucous mob, the subcommittee held the remainder of its hearings in a much smaller room. "This inquiry is official and solemn," announced Chairman William Alden Smith, "and there will be no hippodroming or commercializing of it."

Such fears reflected a persistent problem. In seeking to draw public attention to a specific issue through public hearings and press coverage, congressional investigations have often skirted the boundaries of sensationalism. In 1923 and 1924, for example, Senator Thomas J. Walsh conducted hearings in the Caucus Room on the leasing of naval oil reserves at Teapot Dome, Wyoming. The committee found that former Secretary of the Interior Albert Fall had secretly leased naval oil reserves for over $300,000 in cash and securities. Attacked for partisanship and witch-hunting, Walsh's committee went on to

prove its case, discrediting the Harding administration and sending a cabinet officer to prison for the first time in American history.

One of the most successful investigations took place from 1932 to 1934 during the depths of the Depression, when the Senate Banking Committee examined Wall Street banking and stock exchange practices. Led by counsel Ferdinand Pecora, the committee uncovered shocking information about financial mismanagement, which led to major banking reform and the creation of the Securities and Exchange Commission. During a brief recess in the hearings on May 1, 1933, an enterprising circus agent slipped into the Caucus Room and placed a "professional midget" in the lap of witness J.P. Morgan. Thinking it was a precocious child, Morgan put his arm around her protectively. He said, "I've got a grandson bigger than you." "But I'm older," she replied. "She's 32," the press agent responded. Morgan quickly slid her off his lap but not in time to avoid the awaiting cameras. Despite the committee's request to withhold all photographs, the next morning many newspapers carried pictures of Morgan and the woman, perhaps symbolizing congressional humbling of the once-Olympian banker.

A cartoonist's view of the impact on government officials of the Teapot Dome investigation

During the 1930s the Caucus Room was the site of Senator Gerald P. Nye's inquiry into World War I munitions activity, which greatly influenced later neutrality legislation. Senator Hugo Black conducted a hard hitting investigation into the nation's air mail system. And, in 1937, the Caucus Room echoed with the furor over President Roosevelt's "Court packing scheme." Emphasis shifted to military matters when


J.P. Morgan and the circus performer

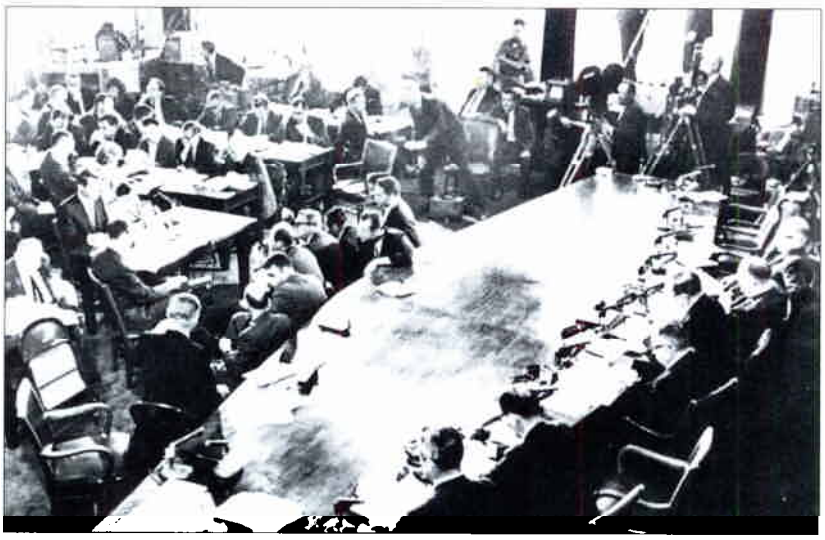

Senator Harry S. Truman chairing the Special Committee to Investigate the National Defense Program

the United States entered the Second World War, and senators explored the errors and responsibilities involved in the Pearl Harbor attack. A long-running investigation into the conduct of the war, which concerned itself with military contracts and profiteering, brought into the spotlight its chairman, a hitherto obscure senator from Missouri, Harry S. Truman.

After the war, a new dimension was added to Senate investigations when television cameras rolled into the Caucus Room. In 1951, the cameras focused on Senator Estes Kefauver's exposé of organized crime, as home television screens carried only the nervous hands of mobsters as they testified before the committee. No event, however, could equal the clash between Senator Joseph McCarthy and the United States Army, which took place in the Caucus Room in 1954. McCarthy had frequently used the room to publicize his charges of Communist influence in the federal government, and it was here that his debate with counsel Joseph Welch turned the tide of public opinion and led to the Senate's censure of McCarthy.

A cartoon dramatizing the effect of television on congressional hearings

Later in the decade, the McClellan investigation of racketeering in labor unions brought Jimmy Hoffa to the stand to testify on Teamster policies and also brought to public attention committee member John F. Kennedy and his brother Robert Kennedy, the committee's counsel. In 1960, John Kennedy used the Caucus Room to declare his presidential candidacy, and eight years later Robert Kennedy

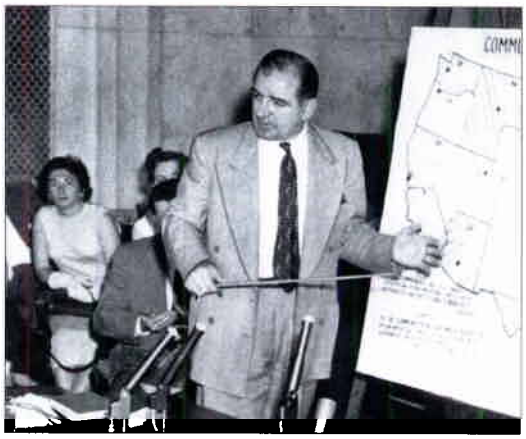


Attorney General Robert Kennedy appearing before Senate Government Operations Committee inquiry into organized crime and illicit traffic in narcotics, October 1963

chose the same setting for his own announcement. Among the other senators to declare their presidential candidacies in the Caucus Room are George McGovern (1971), Henry Jackson (1971), Lloyd Bentsen (1975), Hubert Humphrey (1976), and Howard Baker (1979).

During the 1960s Senator J. William Fulbright used the Caucus Room for hearings on the Vietnam War, grilling administration witnesses and demonstrating a widening breach between the Congress and the White House. Fulbright viewed these hearings as an educational experience, and the press and television expanded his classroom. The media did the same for Senator Sam Ervin in July 1973, when John W. Dean appeared before the special committee investigation of the Watergate burglary and read his lengthy statement on presidential involvement, establishing President Nixon's knowledge of and participation in the initial activities and coverup. In 1987 a joint Senate-House Committee, chaired by Senator Daniel Inouye, met in the Caucus Room to investigate the scandal.

The Caucus Room, primarily renowned as the grand setting for dramatic investigations, is also in constant use for receptions, meetings, memorial services, concerts, religious services, and award ceremonies. Foreign dignitaries, such as Aleksandr Solzhenitsyn, have been entertained here. Each year the Senate wives host a luncheon in honor of the First Lady. In 1962 the room was the setting for the filming of "Advise and Consent." In short, the Senate Caucus Room is alive with melodrama, laughter, and history.



Senator Joseph R. McCarthy, c. 1953

(left) A 1950 Washington Post cartoon satirizing Senator McCarthy's investigation

(left) Senator John F. Kennedy announcing his presidential candidacy

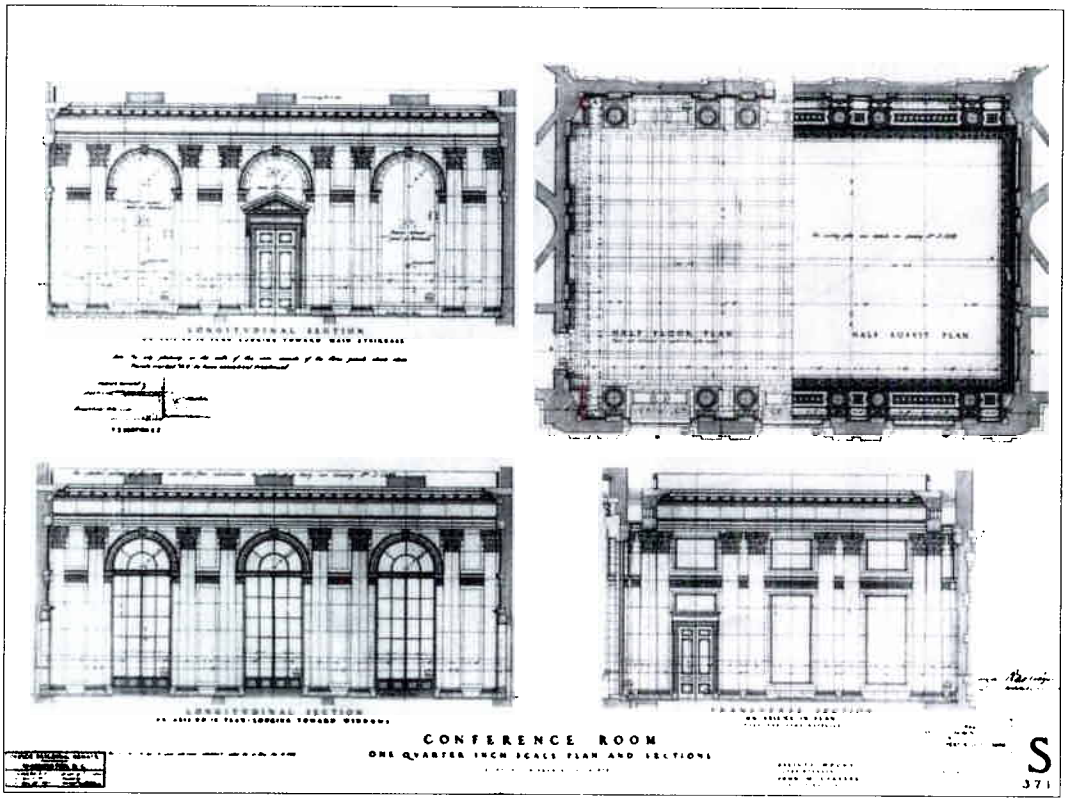
(middle) Senators Howard Baker and Sam Ervin casting votes during 1973 Senate Watergate Committee hearings

(bottom) President Woodrow Wilson drawing the first draft number of World World I in the Caucus Room

(right) Members of the Iran-Contra Committee listening to testimony

(middle) Senate Judiciary Committee during 1991 hearings on Supreme Court nomination of Justice Clarence Thomas

(bottom) Senators welcoming Nobel Prize novelist Aleksandr Solzhenitsyn



Architect's drawings of the Caucus Room's interior